

What is the cake-shaped castle near Loop 202 in Phoenix?

It looks like a tiered wedding cake and is even painted a soft yellow like buttercream. Listen to learn its century-old history (and how to get tour tickets).

Written by Kaila White on Nov. 22, 2019

[Intro music begins]

Kaila VO: Welcome to Valley 101, a podcast from The Arizona Republic and azcentral.com where we answer the questions you ask about metro Phoenix. I'm your host, Kaila White.

Metro Phoenix is home to a number of unique buildings that catch the eye: Frank Lloyd Wright-designed homes, a pyramid that is also a tomb... but in this episode we're looking at one of the most mysterious old buildings in the Valley. A castle.

[Intro music fades out]

You've probably noticed the castle while driving along Loop 202 freeway (ambient freeway sound fades in) as it curves near Van Buren and 52nd streets by the Papago Buttes.

Zoom0017 6:50 **Tamera:** We are in the midst of 44 acres with a castle in the middle of it. That castle is 5,000 square feet. It's 5 stories including the cupola and they're all built on top of each other. It is not round it's actually rectangular.

Kaila VO: The building kind of looks like a wedding cake plopped on top of a hill in the middle of a really well maintained cactus garden. It's even painted a soft yellow reminiscent of buttercream.

Kaila VO: Ok. *What is this castle near Loop 202?*

Tamera: [00:00:51] We're at Tovrea Castle at Carraro Heights. [00:00:52][1.3]

Zoom0016 **Tamera:** [00:00:53] It's the jewel of the Sonoran Desert. It's one of those places that everybody has heard about. But not everybody knows the true story. [00:01:01][7.8]

Kaila VO: That's my tour guide, Tamera Zivic. She's the woman with the keys to this place. (Zoom0018 11:24 sound of her keys clinking)

Zoom0018 11:41 **Kaila:** How many keys do you have?

Tamera: About 40. Well, the older the house, every lock is different, made in place and they can't be duplicated.

Kaila VO: Tamera said a lot of people don't know what the castle is, so plenty of rumors surround it.

Zoom0014 3:28 **Kaila:** What are some of the funniest things people tell you they thought this was?

Tamera: Well we always get that this was Al Capone's hideout. That's a biggie.

3:54 **Tamera:** Other things people talk about is that they thought it was going to be a gambling hall at one time maybe that's the Al Capone side of it.

Kaila VO: It's a castle with a rich history. And it's a big deal - it's on the National Register of Historic Places.

The story of the castle is told in three parts. And all three parts are reflected in the name: Tovrea and Carraro and Heights. It starts in 1907. You know the drill. Let's go back in time.

(Old timey music begins - something from the album "[Steampunk](#)")

Kaila VO: Part one. In 1907, a couple named F.L. and Lizzie Warner came to the area now around the castle but which, back then, was ... nothing. Just desert. They built a home and established a homestead. For those who don't remember, myself included -- the 1862 Homestead Act let any American claim up to 160 acres of federal land FOR FREE if they met certain requirements, like living there for 5 years and farming the land. So that's what the Warners did.

The family acquired more land and, in 1926, they subdivided part of the homestead and called it Warner *Heights*. Part two:

Zoom0016 Tamera: [00:01:15] OK, so in 1927, there was a young man named Alessio Carraro. He was an immigrant from Italy, had been working in San Francisco and had made a fortune in the steel business during the San Francisco earthquake. He was quite an entrepreneur and really wanted to put his stamp on something. When he heard about all of the building going on in Arizona, he came out with his son Leo, and they decided that this would be a great place to have a castle. [00:01:44][28.8]

Kaila VO: The Warner family sold part of their land to Alessio *Carraro*.

Zoom0013 Tamera: 2:55 When they sold it to Alessio Carraro his idea was to build a castle - and make it a boutique hotel - and then of the 277 acres he purchased - you would buy a home site and the castle would be the centerpiece.

3:11 So it was really meant to be a boutique hotel where you came, spent a little bit of time, fell in love with the desert, and then came back and built your own house.

Kaila VO: If you think about it, his hotel idea was brilliant. In the late 1920s, the luxurious Hotel Westward Ho, the Orpheum Theatre and the Arizona Biltmore had just been built. The

beginnings of what is now Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport were being built nearby. Phoenix was in a boom.

(Happy, old-timey music fades out)

Zoom0016 Tamera: [00:05:10] So Alessio Corrado built the property. It was pretty much done. And then we had the 1929 depression. ("War Fields" plays quietly below) His hopes for people coming out and traveling, enjoying the desert, checking into his hotel, buying home sites and having their own homes built, just went out the window when the depression hit.

Kaila VO: Alessio tried to attract visitors but just couldn't. So he put 44 acres and the castle up for sale.

("War Fields" fades out)

And now to part three. Enter Edward Ambrose Tovrea. He was born in 1861 in Illinois. He started life in the midwest working on a cattle ranch. ("[Bad Luck Saloon](#)" fades in) He moved out west to Arizona and worked as a butcher in Jerome, where he was so popular that at the turn of the 20th century he was mayor of Jerome. He later lived in Bisbee for a while and had a butcher shop there.

Zoom0016 Tamera: [00:08:22] He had an affinity for butchering and that's how he built his business. He worked very, very hard and had a real reputation for being one of those guys that his word was his bond. [00:08:34][11.9]

Kaila VO: He moved to Phoenix and founded a meatpacking company in 1919, in the area that is now Van Buren and 48th Streets. It processed tens of thousands of head of cattle a year.

Tamera: [00:08:47] At one time, the Tovrea Packing Company, which became the Arizona Packing Company, hired and employed more people in Arizona than anyone else. So they did acquire quite a bit of wealth. [00:09:01][13.6]

Kaila VO: It just so happened that Tovrea's stockyards and packing company were right next to the castle and he had his eye on it. Alessio decided to cut his losses and sell the castle and 44 acres to E.A. and his second wife, Della, in 1931.

Zoom0016 Tamera: [00:05:49] Now, Alessio went ahead and sold off some of the property, as well as traded for different pieces of land throughout the state. He also did some water witching after that.

Kaila VO: Alessio eventually moved to Yarnell, about 80 miles north of Phoenix, and built Carraro's Grotto, a rock wonderland that still stands today.

Zoom0016 Tamera: [6:09] In the meantime, the Tovreas moved in in June of 1931 and they moved into a brand new place. [00:06:15][25.6]

Kaila VO: So there you have it. The Warner family acquired the land and named it Warner Heights. Alessio Carraro built the castle on it. And the Tovrea family owned and lived in the castle. That's how we get the modern name: Tovrea Castle at Carraro Heights. The Tovreas have the longest history with the castle.

When they moved in to the castle in 1931, EA brought with him a big silver bell that Tamera said miners in Jerome gifted him when he left. It still sits outside.

Zoom0018 16:25 (Ringing the bell)

Kaila VO: EA was a couple decades older than Della, and he lived in the castle with her for less than a year before he died.

Zoom0016 Tamera: [00:06:55] Della was a widow for about four years and then she remarried. She married the publisher of the Prescott Courier, William Plato Stewart [00:07:05][9.7]

Tamera: [00:07:27] We know here in the castle that they spent most of their time in the basement because it was cooler and it was a place where it was a lot larger than any of the other ones. Plato Stewart being the publisher, actually brought in 20 desks from the Prescott Courier to do work. And they made faux walls out of some of the old newspapers that he had published as well. It must have been a sight to see. [00:07:49][21.9]

Tamera: [00:07:51] At that time we still had all of the upper levels, but we understand that Della loved to shop and those levels were full of all kinds of clothing and other purchases, most of them with the tags still on. [00:08:02][11.6]

Kaila VO: She lived there for decades, and eventually was widowed again. Tamera told me a popular story from the 1960s when Della was in her late 70s and living in the castle alone.

("No One Around" begins - atmospheric guitars, desolate sound)

Tamera [00:06:24] And so one night in November of 1968, she had not gone out of town, as was expected. And some folks who thought that she was going to be gone decided that they were going to rustle through the place and decide what they wanted to take.

Kaila VO: The robbers entered through the cupola at the top of the building.

Tamera: [00:06:53] And it was dark. It was stormy. (insert nat sound of raining that runs under this whole section) It was a big night for rain. The telephone lines were down. The electricity was out. She thought maybe that's what was upsetting the pup. (sound of dog barking) But in

fact, it was the guys coming in. And when the dog ran out into the hallway, she followed and met the burglars in the hallway. They backed her up into the kitchen, dumped out the dog food from the Hayden mill sacks that it was in, made a mess. Took all of her silver, (silverware clanking SFX) her jewelry, cash, went down to the basement, got the furs out of the safe down there, tied her up upstairs and left. [00:07:31][37.7]

Kaila VO: Della broke free and tried to call her caretakers who lived down the hill but the phones were down.

Tamera: [00:07:51] So she ran out front and rang the bell (insert nat sound of bell ringing) that had come from the mines in Jerome and were given to her husband, E.A. They didn't come running to help her with that. She's nearly 80. She's in her nightgown. It's storming, it's raining. She runs all the way down the hill and gets the caretakers. They take their car and go and get the police. Police come. [00:08:12][21.2]

Tamera: [00:09:11] They caught one of them. He had melted down the silver into a coffee can. It was quite heavy. And but they never caught the second guy. [00:09:20][9.4]

(fade out rain sound)

Kaila VO: Della caught pneumonia and died shortly after, in 1969.

(music fades out)

The Tovrea heirs owned the property, and EA Tovrea's great-grandson, Phil Tovrea, was the castle's caretaker for years. He changed windows and light bulbs but it's a big property. The castle deteriorated, getting leaks and termites.

In the late 80s, trustees overseeing the castle applied to be allowed to do commercial development on the land. Suddenly, people realized the castle could be sold to developers and changed - or worse - demolished.

Tamera: [00:03:50] a lot of developers wanted to purchase this property. It's unique. Some wanted to save the castle. Others wanted to mow it over and just put up garden apartments, anything like that that might help grow the area. And the citizens of Phoenix said, no way. We want our castle to stay.

Kaila VO: In 1989 Phoenix voters approved a proposition to create a fund the city could use to buy historic properties. The castle received historic overlay zoning, and in 1993 the city bought the castle and a few acres around it. Over the next decade the city bought more land around it, and in the 2000s started restoring the castle. The city stripped asbestos paint from the castle, installed air conditioning, repaired holes in the ceiling and a lot more.

Tamera [00:04:26] And by 2010, the visitor center was being built but there was no money in the city coffers to be able to open it to the public after all that time because we had our own depression.

Kaila VO: Phoenix had to cut budgets during the recession and opening Tovrea Castle to the public wasn't high priority.

Tamera [00:04:37] So at that point, the city of Phoenix said we need help and Tovrea Carraro Society was born. ("Morning in Pioneer Town" begins - peaceful acoustic guitar) We're a nonprofit that was started just to do what we're doing. We operate and manage the castle and the grounds. We give tours, events. We have special group tours. All kinds of different things going on on the property, five out of the seven days a week. [00:04:59][21.9]

Kaila VO: The Tovrea Carraro Society hosted the first tours *inside* the castle in *decades* in 2012, the year Arizona was celebrating its centennial.

I asked Tamera, what's the most common question tourgoers ask?

Zoom0017 7:43 **Tamera:** Why in the world would anybody build a castle in the desert. And it really goes back to the fact that Mr Carraro saw something that other people didn't. He saw that the city was growing and indeed now we're really in the heart of 3 different cities – we have Tempe, Phoenix and Scottsdale right around us. He really wanted to have a castle other people could enjoy and that's why it was a hotel rather than a residence. So he was quite a visionary when he was building this castle.

(music fades out)

Kaila VO: They release 10,000 tickets a year for tours of the castle. It sounds like a lot but they're very hard to get. Recently they sold out in 9 minutes. It's a popular place.

Zoom0018 **Tamera** 7:25 we have visitors coming in from Yugoslavia, yeah, from London, from Germany, all over.

Kaila VO: Yes, it's hard to get tickets. But don't worry, I can take you behind the scenes. Tamera gave us a tour of the castle and the grounds as they are today. Walk with me.

(Music begins - "Dusty Sunset")

Zoom0017 **Tamera** 8:56 it also truly is rich with Arizona history and what the land was like back when and that we have our own preserve here with all kinds of animals you don't normally see in the city anymore. We have the javelina, we have the coyotes, we have the squirrels and the rabbits.

Zoom0017 11:31 **Kaila:** Was that a coyote walking past us when we walked in?

Tamera: Yes it was. We have actually two coyotes that gave birth to six pups and we've been watching them grow since April. They're very good about staying away from us but they are very curious as well.

Kaila VO: At the entrance to the castle are a set of grey terrazzo stairs. She said the marble is from Italy.

Zoom0013 Tamera: 3:20 So these first entry steps would have been where you entered into the hotel. You would have been greeted by staff who would have taken your belongings and taken them up to your room. There are only 8 rooms in the hotel so you know it was only going to be a small short stay.

Kaila VO: We walked in the back door to the castle and had to put little blue booties on our feet like you do in a hospital so that we wouldn't get the original maple floors dirty.

It's bright inside thanks to all of the windows. The main room is filled with exhibits about the castle and the Tovreas, like a dress that belonged to Della. The inside is decorated in an art deco style, with vintage wall sconces and a faux fireplace. To me, it didn't feel like a fancy European castle - it feels Arizonan.

City code doesn't let tours go to the upper floors. But we did go down a steep, narrow staircase into the basement. That's bright, too, and filled with exhibits. Tamera told me about how Alessio was a bit... eccentric when it came to designing the castle.

Zoom0016 Tamera: [00:03:09] Funny story. He chose the height of the basement because he had gotten a refurbished safe door from the Phoenix National Bank and it was only so high. So that's how high he wanted the basement to be. That was the way that the castle was built. If he found something interesting, like in the kitchen, we have mahogany cabinets that hold the plates and the dishes and the foods. Those were actually teller cages from that same Phoenix National Bank. He recycled any reused all of the things that he possibly could. [00:03:39][30.3]

Kaila VO: The basement has three tunnels that lead to the outside. Or well, they're more like short hallways where you can easily walk out to the cactus garden. The view really is amazing.

Zoom0018 Tamera 19:26 So to the north we have a beautiful view of Camelback Mountain and as you turn northeast you see the Papago Buttes. If you keep going all the way to the east, you see Hunt's Tomb where Governor Hunt is buried. That's one of the reasons we have a pyramid on our site is E.A. Tovrea wanted to have his own tomb here. Unfortunately, he couldn't do that. As you move to the south you're actually able to pick up parts of South Mountain and then when you fall to the west you can see downtown phoenix as well as the light rail stations.

Kaila VO: If this really was a boutique hotel I would totally stay here. Rent the whole place out for a party. Convince my friends to buy plots of my land and build a homestead next to me. I get it.

Zoom0017 Tamera: 11:22 Can you imagine staying here as a guest and coming out and enjoying all of this? Especially this time of year. Summer might have been a little more difficult.

Kaila VO: I asked Tamera if any famous people have visited the castle. She said yes.

Zoom0017 **Tamera** 15:10: Bon Jovi!

Kaila: What?!

Tamera: Yeah! They loved it. They loved it.

15:15 **Tamera:** Every city that they're in they try to do some kind of service project with their team and we happen to be the one they chose a few years ago. They had a blast.

Kaila VO: If you want to try to visit the castle, the next round of tickets are for summer 2020 and they go on sale December 2. And if you don't get tickets on the first try, please be patient.

Zoom0017 Tamera 13:42 (laughing) so when those tickets go out and we put them out 4,000 at a time, the lucky people that get those in just a very few minutes now, the ones that don't get those tickets sometimes are not very nice to us and I guess what I'd like to say is we're real people here and those things sting. We're doing our best to get as many people through those doors as we possibly can.

Kaila VO: While it is difficult to get a ticket to visit the castle, there is a simpler way to connect with the Tovreas' history here in Phoenix. You can go to The Stockyards restaurant right next door. It opened in 1947 to support EA Tovrea's stockyards, then became a steakhouse and saloon popular with cattlemen, bankers and politicians. It was restored in 2004 and still serves cocktails and meaty dinners.

(Music - "[Hills of My Childhood](#)")

Well, there you have it. Now you know all about the castle that so many of us pass all the time on the freeway. It started with a visionary immigrant's dream and hard work, survived the Great Depression thanks to a big-time cattle baron and his family, and lives on today after two decades of hard work from historic preservationists.

Zoom0017 **Tamera:** 9:20 We feel like when we take people on a tour they're going back in time a little bit to a time maybe that they'd heard about from their grandparents or great grandparents but never would have known what it was like to live in homes like this.

Zoom0017 **Tamera** 13:11 I guess I wish that people knew how much history really was here and how important it is to the future of Arizona as well. How we treat land like this throughout Arizona is so important and that building and growing is important but it also is important to have those things that once were right in front of us rather than just pictures.

[music swells and fades out]

[theme music begins]

Kaila VO: Well, that's it for today. If you want to see photos and a video from inside the castle, I'll put a link to them in the show notes for this episode. It's part of a monthly series called Hidden Gems, which explores Arizona's most delightful overlooked places. But you *do* have to be a subscriber to azcentral.com to see it. You see, this summer The Arizona Republic started offering *some* of our best original work *exclusively* for subscribers, as a thank you for supporting our work. Yes, this podcast is free, but subscribers do support the Valley 101 team's salaries. If you're interested in becoming a subscriber, visit azcentral.com/join.

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